

WESTWAYS

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Past Time Pleasure

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HOW DID Westerners enjoy themselves before there were huge amusement parks, crowded highways, and beach displays of tanned flesh? This was the question Donald Brewer, director of the USC University Galleries, posed as he began photographic research for an American Bicentennial exhibition. After looking at nearly 3,000 images up and down the state of California, Mr. Brewer brought back about 600 pictures from which 105 were edited for a show titled "Fastest Shutters in the West: Having Fun," which is being circulated by the Western Association of Art Museums.

While a few amateur photographers carried cameras, most of the pictures in the exhibit were made by commercial studios, either hired for the occasion, or on the spot to record events in photographs that they could later sell. There are no familiar names among photographer credits, and some prints were simply labeled "origin unknown." Files from the past are sometimes fortunate to have survived at all.

Mr. Brewer visited historical societies, museums, libraries and privately owned collections. "Only in a few places were the original glass negatives available," he told me. "Mostly we worked with prints or copy prints, but many of these show remarkable clarity and detail. However, the reason for making the print was almost always to document the event rather than to create a work of art."

Most artistic photographers in those days were not shooting everyday journalistic images of their times. (They were in Yosemite or Yellowstone making scenic views that would sell in the East.) Even so, the amateur and commercial photographers responsible for "Having Fun" were often highly

skilled, and had good equipment. It is not certain whether any of the snapshooters used an early hand-held Kodak; most of the pictures seem to have been taken with slow, ponderous cameras on tripods.

However, as Mr. Brewer points out, many of the images are eloquent in spite of slow films and lenses which did not allow for stopping fast or even moderate subject movement. People had to stand still, and those we see here seem to be people of means. Photography was a rather expensive hobby then, and ordinarily it was the middle and upper classes who were preserved on film.

The slower pace of life seems evident in leisure activities. People were hiking in wilderness that may now be dotted with taco stands. Bathers were stymied by dark suits that must have made a hot day at the beach hellish. There were long elegant dresses and bowler hats for bicyclists and croquet players, but the saloon at Randsburg indicates that fun and games were not reserved for just the fashionable.

Having fun today is obviously more sophisticated and mechanized, but is it more exciting? It is likely that a youngster of 1895 would find the "white knuckler" at Magic Mountain a giant thrill, and early California parents would be pop-eyed on animated Disneyland rides, but wouldn't a modern family enjoy taking a horse and buggy to the beach for a day? Of course, especially if we had a temporary moratorium on cars, buses, trucks and traffic lights.

Yes, recreation is more elaborate in the 1970s, but these pictures have a strong nostalgic flavor we can appreciate without having to give up our faster pace. We can recall our good times as we reflect on fun of Western life in the past. W



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